NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

SIXTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • 737-4215 extension 224

FOR RELEASE:
TUESDAY P.M.,
September 29, 1970

NATIONAL GALLERY ACQUIRES IMPORTANT EARLY CÉZANNE PAINTING

WASHINGTON, D. C. The Artist's Father, a life-size portrait by Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), the most important purchase made by the National Gallery of Art since the Leonardo da Vinci in 1967, has been acquired on the initiative and through the generosity of Paul Mellon, President of the National Gallery.

"It's a powerhouse" is the way the Gallery's Director, J. Carter Brown, described it. "For sheer scale, intensity, and impact, I would put this painting up against anything in our collections."

The painting, on view in Lobby D, has been shown publicly only twice and never in the United States. It was formerly in the Lecomte family collection, Paris, one of the world's foremost holdings of Cézanne paintings.

The portrait is the earliest (1866) and largest (78-1/8 x 47 inches) of the Gallery's twelve paintings by Cézanne. The twenty-seven-year-old artist portrayed his father posed frontally, seated in a high-backed armchair with legs crossed, absorbed in reading L'Evénement, an important newspaper of the day. On the wall above the chair, the artist reproduced one of his early still life paintings.

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The presence of L'Evénement in the painting, according to the noted art historian, John Rewald, is an acknowledgement of a tribute to Cézanne by Émile Zola, at that time a critic for the newspaper. (An article by Mr. Rewald on this painting will appear in the 1970 edition of Studies in the History of Art, published by the National Gallery of Art.)

Zola described the elder Cézanne as "mocking, republican, bourgeois, cold, meticulous, stingy." A self-made financier, Louis-Auguste Cézanne forced his only son into legal studies, but was eventually persuaded to allow him to go to Paris to study art, and even supported him financially. As Paul Cézanne's art was misunderstood and even reviled in Cézanne's lifetime, this support was a necessity.

The heavy, expressive application of paint reflects some of the turbulence of the imaginary subjects Cézanne frequently painted in this early phase of his development. Cézanne devoted his career to creating paintings that were hoped to be, in his words "solid and durable,like the art of the museums." In the early portraits, often larger than life, Cézanne sought the greatest possible power through simplicity of composition. In the monumentality, broad execution, and blunt presentation of the sitter, they show the influence of Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) and the Spanish masters, but evidence a new roughness that is the harbinger of the Expressionist movement that was to follow with the advent of the twentieth century.

The Artist's Father is considered a pendant to the portrait of

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Achille Emperaire, recently acquired by the Louvre and formerly in the Lecomte family collection. The Lecomte collection was formed by Auguste Pellerin, a prominent late-nineteenth-century industrialist and one of Cézanne's great admirers. The collection has largely remained in the family since. In 1964 the National Gallery of London acquired from this collection the late Bathers with a Special Grant from the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

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Scan of photocopy of photograph. Photograph is located in the Press Release files.

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
WASHINGTON, D.C.

TITLE: The Artist's Father, 1866
Oil on canvas
(78-1/8 x 47 inches

ARTIST: Paul Cézanne
French, 1839-1906

PLEASE CREDIT: National Gallery of Art
Washington, D.C.
Paul Mellon Collection, 1970

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NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

The New York Times, Wednesday, September 30, 1970

"PAINTING SHOWED PROMISE OF GENIUS"

An Appraisal by Hilton Kramer

"The Artist's Father," the large portrait Paul Cézanne painted in 1866 at the age of 27, is one of the most powerful pictures this great painter produced in the difficult, early year of his career. It is a painting that looks to the past, however, far more than it looks to the future. It reflects Cézanne's extraordinary mastery of a certain established style--particularly the blunt realism of Courbet--while disclosing little evidence of that luminous chromatic architecture that we now identify as Cézanne's unique contribution to modern painting and that has such a widespread influence on the art of the 20th century. It is a masterpiece, but a masterpiece by an artist who is still groping his way to an esthetic terrain he can truly call his own.

It is a painting that speaks of high ambition, immense talent and enormous expressive drive--the ambition to produce an art equal to anything achieved by the Old Masters. The bold and confident application of the pigment, which is laid on with the palette knife in a thick, emotion-charged paste; the placement of the life-size figure in a space completely responsive to the artist's will; even certain awkwardnesses in the rendering of details that the painter could not avoid in the heat and determination of so ambitious a picture--these and other aspects of this marvelous painting mark it as a work of genius, but a genius who is still finding his way, still attending to the lessons of the masters without having yet broken free into his own most personal style.

It was painted in one of the unhappiest periods of the artist's life. Cézanne had attempted, earlier the same year, to show his work in the official Salon, and had been refused. He wrote an indignant letter to the Government official in charge of the Salon, demanding that the Salon des Refusés--which had been organized three years earlier to accommodate artists whose work had been refused by the official Salon--be revived. But on this score, too, he was turned down. When he returned to his family in Aix, he was penniless, disheartened, and without any clear prospects for pursuing his career as a painter.

His relations with his father, a small-town banker who only reluctantly and condescendingly accepted Cézanne's decision to become an artist, were extremely exacerbated, and one can only imagine what emotions the painter must have experienced in executing this portrait of the small-minded man who, in many ways, held the keys to his fate. Émile Zola, who had been a friend of Cézanne's since their boyhood, described the elder Cézanne as "mocking, republican, bourgeois, cold, meticulous, stingy," and, if anything, understated the case. We have a pretty good account of Cézanne's own feelings about his family situation at the time he painted this portrait in a letter he wrote to Camille Pissarro: "Here I am with my family with the most disgusting people in the world, those who compose my family stinking more than any."

Whatever Cézanne's private feelings, however, he conferred on the subject of this picture a profound dignity and solidity. He made something monumental and classical out of this familiar and painful subject, and it is this monumental quality above all that gives "The Artist's Father" its special distinction as a Cézannean masterpiece.